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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) to determine the extent to which the college's Associate in Arts (AA) degree graduates possessed the characteristics of "nontraditional" students (e.g., older, employed, married, or attending on a part-time or stopout basis). A random sample of 400 AA graduates was drawn from the 2,829 students who graduated during the 1985-86 academic year. Transcripts and graduation information system reports were available for 377 of these graduates. Study findings included the following: (1) 74% of the graduates had enrolled on a part-time basis for at least one term, and 28% had attended part time for over half of their attendance at the college; (2) 36% had enrolled for a term and then officially withdrawn from MDCC; (3) 31% skipped at least one major term during their enrollment, and 25% skipped two or more terms; (4) 23% earned credit at other institutions; (5) 64% of the graduates were enrolled for six or more major terms, and 28% for 8 or more; (6) 33% began their enrollment five or more years prior to graduation; (7) 25% had taken some remedial coursework at MDCC; (8) 82% withdrew from at least one course; (9) 80% had made program changes, averaging three changes in major during their attendance; and (10) only 4% of the AA graduates showed any English-as-a-Second-Language credits. (AAC)

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COMMUNITY COLLEGE ASSOCIATE IN ARTS
DEGREE GRADUATES:
TRADITIONAL OR NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS?

Research Report No. 87-20

May 1987

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JC 890 159

Community College Associate in Arts Degree Graduates:
Traditional or Non-Traditional Students?

Introduction

As unique features of community college students begin to emerge in higher education literature, profiles of Associate in Arts degree (transfer degree) graduates become relevant. Characteristics of "non-traditional" community college students may include: the fact that they are generally older, employed and/or married and thus less likely to attend school on a full-time basis;¹ added responsibilities which may lead to "stopping out" for several terms, a phenomenon investigated in its own right;² more likelihood to earn credit across institutions, since "stopouts" may return to higher education at a later time and different location;³ some likelihood to be academically underprepared,⁴ either because of low achievement in high school or length of time since they last attended school;⁵ and, by inference from the factors noted above, a tendency to change goals during the course of their academic tenure. Are these non-traditional students actually graduating, or are community college graduates drawn only from the pool of traditional full-time academically able enrollees?

Data from two large systems, California and New York, provide some tentative answers. The authors of California's statewide longitudinal study developed post hoc transfer student prototypes and explored the characteristics of students so classified.⁶ The transfer student prototypes were the youngest (mean age=21), which suggests that they contained more "traditional" students. On the other hand, one of the transfer prototypes consisted of students with basic skills problems, and another consisted of

¹For a good summary of characteristics related to non-traditional student attrition see Bean & Metzner, 1985.

²For example, Willet, 1983.

³Lenning, Beal & Sauer, 1980.

⁴The term "academically underprepared" was coined by Losak in his dissertation (1969) and published in Losak, 1972.

⁵The term "New Students" was specifically reserved for the academically underprepared learners who were low achievers in high school by Cross, 1971.

⁶Note that these were not graduates, but can give a clue to characteristics of the pool that make up A.S. degree graduates.

part-timers.⁷ The authors of a CUNY graduate profile noted that 30% of their AA graduates were over 30 years old, 74% took longer than two years to graduate, and 40% showed some part-time enrollment.⁸ These characteristics suggest that many graduates were non-traditional students. The purpose of the present study is to examine Miami-Dade's Associate in Arts degree graduates to determine to what extent their characteristics are those of community college non-traditional students.

Method

A random sample of 400 Associate in Arts graduates was drawn from the 2829 graduates for the 1985-86 academic year. Both transcripts and AGIS reports were available for 377 of these graduates, which constitute the sample used in the present study. Coding of transcripts and AGIS data was done by three staff members in the Institutional Research office. Results were entered into a database for analysis.⁹ Additional data were provided by a special run of the Miami-Dade graduate profile computer jobs to include Associate in Arts degree graduates only.¹⁰

Results

Term attendance patterns. Non-traditional students would be expected to attend some terms on a part-time basis, "stop-out" of school and then return, and spread their education across institutions. These three characteristics were evident in Miami-Dade AA graduates:

- *74% of the graduates had enrolled on a part-time basis for at least one major term, and 28% had enrolled on a part-time basis for over half of their major terms;
- *36% of the graduates had enrolled for a term and then officially withdrawn from school;
- *31% skipped at least one major term during their enrollment ("stopping out"), and 25% skipped two or more major terms;

⁷Sheldon, 1982; Knoell, 1982.

⁸Murtha, Protash, & Kaufman, 1981.

⁹For an analysis of curricular patterns found in this sample see Morris, 1987.

¹⁰For the complete profile data including vocational graduates see Losak, 1986.

*23% of the graduates earned credit at other institutions. 14% began enrollment at Miami-Dade as transfer students, while 9% began as Miami-Dade natives, earned credit elsewhere, and finally graduated at Miami-Dade.

Protracted Attendance.¹¹ Non-traditional students would not be expected to graduate "on time" (within two years for an AA degree). Because these students attend some major terms on a part-time basis, the total number of major terms enrolled would be greater than four. Also, the tendency to "stop-out" of school and then return, would lead to more than two years from start to finish of the degree. These students would not receive the AA degree at age twenty, even if they did indeed enter Miami-Dade as 18-year-olds immediately out of high school. Protracted attendance patterns were evident for Miami-Dade AA graduates:

- *64% of the graduates were enrolled for six or more major terms, and 28% were enrolled for eight or more;
- *33% of the graduates began their enrollment five or more years prior to graduation;
- *10% of the graduates were admitted to Miami-Dade eight or more years prior to graduation;
- *The mean age at graduation was 23 years old.

Academically underprepared students. Non-traditional students may be academically underprepared for college level work, either because of low high school achievement or length of time since high school graduation. College preparatory ("developmental") work would be expected during their tenure, as would withdrawal from some courses and retakes of others. These patterns were found for Miami-Dade AA graduates:

- *25% of the graduates had taken some college preparatory coursework at Miami-Dade. This was true for students who transferred in as well as for native M-DCC students;

¹¹The data in this section refer to native M-DCC students only. Transfer students had already earned credit toward the degree and would not reflect the "typical" tenure at Miami-Dade from start to finish.

*82% of the graduates withdrew from at least one course, 53% withdrew from three or more, and 35% withdrew from five or more.
*50% of the graduates retook a course at least once, and 30% retook courses two or more times.

Changing goals. Non-traditional students would be expected to be less sure of the particular course of study they wished to pursue. Changes in major (program declarations), as well as exploration of courses in the curriculum are likely. Data for Miami-Dade AA graduates showed:

*80% of the graduates had made program changes, and averaged 3 changes during their tenure;
*87% of the graduates had credits in excess of those needed for the degree, with an average of 14 credits in excess.¹²

Acceleration and excellence. Clearly the majority of graduates show features of the non-traditional student population. Miami-Dade graduates also show characteristics associated with the more traditional college student:

*26% of the AA graduates had earned credit through CLEP. For those who had done so, the average CLEP credits were 12.
*9% of the graduates had taken honors courses at Miami-Dade. For those who had done so, the average honors credits were 8.

One surprising finding. Miami-Dade's foreign student enrollment is greater than any other institution of higher learning in the country,¹³ and our ESL course enrollments are substantial. If these students are like traditional students, we would expect them to complete their education at one institution- e.g. Miami-Dade. Data for AA graduates suggests that this is not the case:

*Only 4% of the AA graduates showed any ESL credits.

¹²This figure excludes transfer students who might be expected to bring in some credits which would not count toward their degree.

¹³Baldwin, 1986.

Summary

Miami-Dade Associate in Arts graduates exhibit characteristics of the non-traditional students served by the College. Term attendance patterns reflected some part-time enrollment for 74% of the graduates, "stopping out" for at least one major term for 31% of the graduates, and enrollment at other institutions for 23%. One third of the graduates began their enrollment five or more years prior to graduation, one fourth had taken college preparatory work, and over 80% evidenced exploration of the curriculum by changing programs and by taking extra courses. The data from this study demonstrate that non-traditional students are surviving and graduating at Miami-Dade.

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